

## Research Article

# Legal regulation of counteraction and investigation of crimes committed by organized criminal groups in the field of drug trafficking

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**Received:** 24 December 2025; **Manuscript No:** JDAR-26-186108; **Editor assigned:** 26 December 2025; **PreQC No:** JDAR-26-186108 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 09 January 2026; **QC No:** JDAR-26-186108; **Revised:** 16 January 2026; **Manuscript No:** JDAR-26-186108 (R); **Published:** 23 January 2026; **DOI:** 10.4303/JDAR/236491

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### Abstract

**Aim:** The paper's goal is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the features of legal governance with regard to the prevention of illegal drug trafficking and the investigation of crimes committed by organized crime groups in the field of drug distribution.

**Methods:** The research's methodological basis consists of a variety of general scientific and specialized legal procedures that ensure the methodical and unbiased scholarly examination of problems in the fight against drug-related offenses. In particular, the method of summarizing enforcement agencies' experience was used to identify the most common ways of committing crimes in this area, such as the use of digital currencies, dedicated telegram channels, and "dead drops," and to identify difficult aspects of carrying out covert investigative (search) operations. The legal structuring approach was used to formulate recommendations for improving current legislation, especially with regard to legislative control over the use of electronic evidence, expanding the scope of international cooperation between law enforcement agencies, and strengthening systems for fiscal oversight of profits from the distribution of illegal drugs.

**Results:** The report offers a thorough analysis of the legal principles of preventing the illegal transportation of psychoactive substances, prohibited substances, and precursor chemicals, as well as the unique features of investigating crimes carried out by organized crime groups in this industry. In addition to the requirements of Ukrainian criminal, criminal procedural, and particular legislation, the provisions of international legal documents concerning drug crime suppression are analyzed. The main challenges in the actual implementation of covert investigative (search) techniques, the barriers to international cooperation between law enforcement agencies, and the subtleties of proving the activities of organized crime groups in criminal processes are acknowledged.

**Conclusion:** It is stated that laws and their execution strategies need to be improved in light of current challenges, particularly the martial law climate and the widespread use of technological devices in criminal activities. A collection of standards from criminal, procedural, and international agreements form the basis of the regulatory framework used

by organized criminal units to stop the supply of illegal drugs. However, the growth of cross-border drug trafficking trends, the digitalization of illicit schemes, and contemporary security threats call for ongoing improvements to legislative tools and an increase in the effectiveness of law enforcement initiatives.

**Keywords:** Narcotic drugs, Psychotropic substances, Precursors, Illegal drug trafficking, Fighting drug-related crimes, Criminal law, Administrative and legal analysis, Crime investigation, Organized crime

### Introduction

The unlawful trafficking of narcotic narcotics, psychotropic substances, and precursors is one of the most hazardous forms of criminal activity. It compromises a state's national security principles, puts public safety in grave danger, and has a detrimental impact on population health [1]. Particularly dangerous are crimes in this area carried out by organized crime groups. High levels of secrecy, operational stability, a clear division of tasks among members, a frequently global scope of operations, and active use of modern information and communication technology are characteristics of such entities [2].

In contrast to the traditional view of crime as a one-time, localized event in time and space, organized crime is a long-term, structured and self-replicating process that includes preparation, direct commission of crimes, their concealment, legalization of criminal proceeds and

neutralization of law enforcement influence. Within such a process, opposition to law enforcement agencies is not an optional or auxiliary element, but an internally necessary condition for the preservation, stability and development of a criminal organization. Without effective opposition to the investigation, organized crime loses its ability to exist for a long time, which causes special attention of criminal structures to the formation and improvement of relevant mechanisms [3].

That is why the investigation of crimes committed by organized criminal groups is almost always accompanied by active, targeted and multi-level counteraction, which covers both direct investigative actions and the broader socio-legal context. Such counteraction significantly affects the possibility of establishing objective truth in criminal proceedings, complicating the process of proving, distorting the information picture of the crime event and creating additional procedural and tactical barriers for the investigation and the court [4].

In the context of working with the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE) to combat organized crime and drug trafficking, Ukraine has also promised to align its domestic legislation with international norms [5]. This necessitates a scholarly reassessment of current legal strategies, the discovery of gaps and contradictions in regulatory laws, and the development of suggestions for additional improvement while taking into consideration best practices from throughout the world [6].

Examining the legal guidelines for combating and looking into crimes committed by organized crime groups engaged in drug trafficking is both pertinent and well-founded within this framework. The results could have a significant practical impact on how prosecutors, judicial authorities, and pre-trial investigative organizations operate [7].

The current condition of legal administration in Ukraine's fight against organized drug crime involves a complex web of interrelated theoretical and practical issues, from which a number of key areas need differentiation [8,9].

First, it is still difficult for law enforcement to distinguish between the terms "organized group" and "criminal organization," which makes it difficult to accurately classify criminal charges related to the transportation of illicit drugs and could lead to uneven judicial decisions.

Second, there are significant challenges in verifying characteristics of organized crime groups, such as their consistency, internal organization, and coherence of member behaviors. Effective documentation of persistent illegal activities is not always guaranteed by contemporary procedural systems, especially when digital technology and anonymization tools are used [9].

Thirdly, the use of covert investigative (surveillance) methods in criminal proceedings involving organized drug offenses continues to present challenges, especially when it comes to maintaining a balance between the effectiveness of the investigation and the international and constitutional guarantees safeguarding individual rights and liberties.

Fourth, there is still a lack of development in the regulatory framework that governs the use of digital proof pertaining to the operation of bitcoin transfers, online drug distribution networks, and the use of external servers, which prevents them from being properly considered as evidence in court [10].

Fifth, under the current international cooperation systems in the fight against transnational organized drug crime, the processes for turning over members of criminal collectives, carrying out requests for mutual legal assistance, and exchanging intelligence are not always sufficiently effective.

## Methods

A number of interconnected general scientific and specialized legal approaches form the doctrinal basis for analyzing the legal governance of combating and investigating illegal acts carried out by organized criminal syndicates in the area of illicit narcotic commerce. It was possible to guarantee the comprehensiveness, coherence, and objectivity of the academic analysis of the contested topics by using such a set of methods.

In light of current societal changes, the dialectical technique was employed to clarify the patterns of development in laws that combat organized crime.

The formal-legal (dogmatic) method was used to describe the characteristics of organized forms of criminality and study the content of criminal law provisions that set punishments for crimes related to the illegal drug trade. The provisions of Articles 28, 305, 307, and 311 of the Ukrainian

criminal code were specifically examined [11]. This method was used to understand legal terms like “organized group,” “criminal enterprise,” “controlled distribution,” and “covert investigative (search) activity.” For example, according to Article 28 of the Ukrainian criminal code, an organized collective is defined by a prior agreement between many parties, the consistency of its membership, and the coordination of its members’ acts [12].

The origins of criminal law positions on the definition of organized crime and the development of accountability for participation in the operations of organized drug groups were investigated using the historical-legal technique. For instance, organized assemblies were used to track the progressive tightening of criminal punishments for violations related to the illegal drug trade as well as the expansion of the list of aggravating circumstances associated with committing such crimes.

The approach of judicial practice review made it conceivable to establish typical characteristics of the operations of organized criminal entities in the drug trade sector and the challenges inherent in substantiating their structure during criminal procedures. Court decisions pertaining to the illegal transportation of precursors (Article 311 of the criminal code of Ukraine). For example, it became difficult to demonstrate the stability and hierarchical structure of a criminal collective in a number of court rulings [13].

Suggestions for improving current statutes were developed using the legal modeling technique. Specifically, potential avenues for regulatory governance over the utilization of digital evidence in criminal proceedings, the broadening of mutual collaboration mechanisms in combating transnational narcotics crime, and the tightening of oversight over monetary flows tied to illicit drug trafficking were put forth [14].

## Results and Discussion

These activities include the unlawful production, manufacture, acquisition, storage, transportation, transfer, and sale of narcotic narcotics and psychotropic substances, as well as engaging in these operations without the intention of selling [15]. The unlawful cultivation of plants that contain narcotic substances, especially cannabis or opium poppies, the creation or maintenance of locations for their production or consumption, and the fraudulent use

or counterfeiting of documents required to obtain narcotic drugs are all included in this category of offenses. Articles 305-320 of the Ukrainian criminal code [16] make all of the aforementioned activities illegal. For instance, Article 309 of the Ukrainian criminal code requires penalty for the unlawful possession or acquisition of narcotic drugs without the intention of trading, while Article 307 of the criminal code of Ukraine specifies penalties for the criminal manufacturing and trafficking of narcotic narcotics.

Statistics from law enforcement agencies, which demonstrate the significant scope of drug offenses in Ukraine, support the urgency of the problem. As a result, elements of the Ukrainian national police discovered hundreds of thousands of criminal offenses related to the distribution of illegal drugs between 2023 and 2025. In particular, 624 crimes were reported under Article 305 of the Ukrainian criminal code (drug smuggling), 347 under Article 306, 47,636 under Article 307, 83,654 under Article 309, 596 under Article 313, 1606 under Article 315, 5896 under Article 318, 72 under Article 319, 68 under Article 320, 495 under Article 321, and 1437 under Article 321. Additionally, 1,015 routes for the illegal passage of drugs across the state boundary were eliminated by police organizations within the allotted period [17]. These statistics show how common drug-related crimes are and how difficult it is to stop them.

Herbal compounds are the most common narcotics in Ukraine, according to an analysis of data from investigative and operational operations. These are mostly made from hemp or poppy plants. For example, the opium poppy produces opium, morphine, codeine, and acetylated opium in addition to poppy straw. Synthetic and semi-synthetic compounds made from natural elements make up the following category. At the same time, hemp is the source of cannabis, hashish, and other derivative drugs that are often traded illegally [18].

Most criminal offenses in the illegal drug trade are deliberate. Such illegal action typically requires careful planning for a future offense during its preparatory phase. In particular, criminals choose the type of drug that will be the subject of the crime, decide how to make or obtain it, look for places to store or sell it, and set up the necessary technical equipment and concealment techniques. Additionally, the organizers of criminal schemes assign different roles to additional individuals and include them in complicity [19].

From an operational standpoint, the trafficking of illegal drugs is a complex, multi-tiered system with multiple interconnected phases [20]. These include, among other things, the illegal production or acquisition of narcotics, their transportation to locations for storage or sale, and direct sale to the final customer. These projects are usually carried out *via* large-scale illegal networks that coordinate the activities of many individuals in order to conceal illegal activities and make money.

Investigating criminal charges exposes a variety of drug trafficking sources. In particular, about 39% of the time, drugs are purchased *via* suppliers or smugglers who oversee their transportation from other countries. The illicit production of narcotics from wild plants, such as cannabis or opium poppies, accounts for about 32% of cases, while growing forbidden plants in properly designed plots accounts for another 10%. In other cases, medicines are manufactured from pharmaceutical items (around 4%) that contain psychotropic or narcotic ingredients. About 17% of the reviewed incidents involve the theft of narcotic medications from pharmacies or medical facilities [21]. For example, examples of taking morphine or other powerful medications from medical facilities and then selling them illegally have been reported during investigations.

The ability of individual criminal acts to function as

independent elements or as components of a single criminal infrastructure operating concurrently across several fronts is a defining characteristic of the modern drug economy. The so-called remote marketing techniques for drugs are becoming more common in the current situation. Usually, organized criminal groups with clearly defined roles for each member orchestrate such arrangements. For instance, the treasurer oversees financial transactions, the recruiter attracts new members, the delivery person guarantees the movement of drugs, the chief organizes the group's overall activities, the scheduler controls member communication, the technology specialist is responsible for the operation of web platforms or messaging channels, and the so-called "stagers" place drugs in designated locations for later retrieval by buyers.

There are several stages that make up a typical blueprint for the "electronic" drug trade. The drugs are first divided and wrapped in preparation for vending. After that, information about the sale is shared on websites or messaging applications, which is essentially marketing. Following an order, the group members physically transfer the medicines, possibly by placing "drops" in predetermined areas. Payment is typically made remotely *via* cryptocurrency or digital payment methods, after which the acquired money goes through additional "cleaning" procedures to validate the illegal profits [22] (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Peculiarities of investigating crimes committed by organized criminal groups in the field of drug trafficking.

No.	Primary methods (aspects) of carrying out an inquiry prior to trial	Establishing the organizational structure of criminal activity, in particular, identifying the hierarchy of participants, the stability of the association, the presence of a prior conspiracy, the distribution of functional roles between accomplices, and the multi-episode nature of illegal activity	Tools for procedures	Errors in the legal qualification of a crime, in particular, the reclassification of the activities of an organized group to the complicity of a group of persons in a prior conspiracy, which is often due to the difficulty of proving the stability and organization of a criminal association
1	Establishing and proving the organization and structure of criminal activity;	Comprehensive conduct of investigative and operational-search measures aimed at documenting the activities of the entire criminal network, and not only individual episodes of the criminal offense;	Application of a complex of covert investigative (search) actions, financial monitoring, analysis of telecommunication contacts and interrogations of participants in criminal proceedings;	Premature exposure of criminal activity, which may lead to the loss of important evidence, as well as to insufficient establishment of the role of the organizer or coordinator of the criminal scheme;
2	The initial stage of investigating a criminal offense;	Active use of covert investigative (search) actions, in particular, conducting controlled purchases, using audio and video recording equipment, as well as extracting and analyzing information from electronic communication networks;	Conducting procedural investigative actions, in particular searches, obtaining temporary access to things and documents, applying preventive measures in the form of detention, as well as entering information into the unified register of pre-trial investigations;	The risk of recognizing evidence as inadmissible if, during investigative or procedural actions, the requirements of criminal procedural legislation were violated;
3	The application of secret investigative (search) techniques;	Recording contemporary techniques for selling illegal substances, such as the "bookmark" system, cryptocurrency payments (like Bitcoin), darknet resources, and messenger communication platforms	Use of the methods outlined in chapter 21 of the ukrainian criminal procedure code, including carrying out covert investigative (search) actions based on pertinent rulings by the examining judge;	The challenge of identifying participants in illegal activities, which is linked to the use of encryption techniques, anonymous accounts, and other technology that make it challenging to identify particular people;

4	Recording and documenting the facts of contactless drug sales;	Use of special knowledge to establish the characteristics of narcotic substances, in particular, determining their quantitative indicators, concentration of active components, as well as methods and technologies for their manufacture;	Research of digital traces of criminal activity, including analysis of transactions in blockchain networks, verification of electronic evidence and conducting computer-technical examinations;	A significant burden on expert institutions, which leads to a delay in the terms of conducting forensic examinations and, accordingly, an extension of the terms of the pre-trial investigation;
5	Attracting specialized knowledge and expert support;	Investigation of financial transactions related to illicit drug trafficking, including verification of the sources of origin of funds and proof of their criminal origin;	Use of special expert studies, in particular chemical, biological, computer-technical and economic forensic examinations;	The use of cryptocurrency payments and the involvement of front persons, which makes it difficult to track financial flows and prove the illegal origin of funds;
6	Researching financial flows and sources of illegal income;	Establishment of international channels of supply and distribution of narcotic drugs, as well as routes of their transportation;	Interaction with financial monitoring bodies, application of measures to seize property, as well as analysis of banking transactions related to possible proceeds from illegal activities;	Difficulties of international cooperation associated with long deadlines for executing requests for international legal assistance and differences in the legal systems of different states;
7	The international legal dimension of the investigation;	Ensuring interagency interaction between various law enforcement and control bodies, in particular the national police of Ukraine, the security service of Ukraine, prosecutor's offices and customs authorities;	International cooperation in the field of criminal prosecution, in particular the creation of joint investigation teams, the use of Interpol channels and the execution of international warrants;	Insufficient level of interdepartmental coordination, which sometimes leads to duplication of functions by different law enforcement agencies or inconsistency of their actions;
8	Cooperation and coordination among law enforcement organizations;	Upholding, in compliance with the requirements of the Ukrainian constitution and international standards for the protection of human rights, a balance between the efficacy of the use of covert investigative (search) activities and protections of the rights and freedoms of suspected individuals.	Coordination between departments, including joint operational meetings and procedural discussions in which the prosecutor participates;	Procedural hazards in the employment of covert investigative (search) acts, which could result in the evidence being recognized as inadmissible if the established procedure for their conduct is violated
9	Assuring adherence to and defense of human liberties and rights.	Establishing the organizational structure of criminal activity, in particular, identifying the hierarchy of participants, the stability of the association, the presence of a prior conspiracy, the distribution of functional roles between accomplices, and the multi-episode nature of illegal activity;	Ensuring judicial control and procedural guarantees for the protection of the rights of participants in criminal proceedings.	Mistakes in the legal definition of a crime, namely the reclassification of an organized group's actions to the involvement of a number of people in a previous conspiracy, which is frequently caused by the challenge of demonstrating the permanence and organization of a criminal association;

In the area of illegal substance distribution, the investigation of criminal activities carried out by cohesive criminal syndicates is characterized by a high level of complexity. This is due to a number of objective factors, including the persistence and durability of criminal groups, the covert nature of their activities, the clear division of functional duties among members, and the proactive use of modern technology to conceal illegal activities. Organized drug crime, in contrast to individual drug offenses, is usually systematic, comprising several occurrences over a long period of time, requiring a comprehensive and consistent approach for gathering evidence and recording illegal behavior [23].

Verifying the structured nature of the offense in accordance with the requirements of Article 28 of the Ukrainian penal code presents an additional challenge for law enforcement [24]. Merely proving that multiple people participated in illegal activities is inadequate to classify a crime as being perpetrated by an organized group. Additionally, it is

necessary to show that there is a solid alliance, that the act was planned beforehand, that the participants' behaviors are consistent, that there is a command structure, and that the group members' responsibilities are clearly assigned.

In criminal procedures of this kind, the preliminary phase of the examination is very important because it establishes the basic evidentiary foundation and determines the subsequent approach for performing investigative and intelligence-gathering operations. The results of intelligence operations, analytical reports from security agencies, public accounts, intelligence provided by confidential informants, and data acquired through international agreement are some examples of information sources regarding the behavior of organized criminal entities engaged in illegal substance trafficking.

A series of preliminary investigative and covert investigative (search) procedures are usually carried out when information about a criminal offense is entered

into the consolidated register of pre-trial Inquiries [25]. The necessity of concurrently combining procedural investigative measures with intelligence-gathering operations is a distinctive feature of investigating such offenses. This approach makes it possible to document not just isolated cases of the distribution of illegal substances but also the entire operation of the criminal organization, including its coordinators, masterminds, and other members.

According to chapter 21 of the criminal procedure code of Ukraine [26], one unique feature of looking into crimes related to organized drug offenses is the extensive use of non-obvious investigation (search) techniques. Using these procedural tools makes it easier to document covert criminal conduct and reveal the covert nature of organized drug cartel members' activities.

In such criminal cases, the most effective non-obvious investigative (search) actions include: Audio and visual monitoring of an individual; data extraction from electronic communication conduits; supervision during the commission of a crime (including through controlled delivery or sting operations); observation of a person, object, or location; and tracking the location of electronic devices [27].

Simultaneously, strict adherence to procedural safeguards for legality is crucial throughout an investigation. If the investigating judge's approval for non-obvious investigative (search) actions is not acquired in compliance with the necessary procedure, or if their conclusions are not sufficiently documented, the related evidence may be deemed inadmissible in court proceedings [28].

The primary objective of a pre-trial investigation is to identify and validate the indicators of organized crime. These indicators include how long-lasting the criminal association's operations are, how well-planned criminal activities are, whether an orchestrator or facilitator is present, how participants' roles are clearly assigned, and whether the activity's goal is to systematically secure illicit gains [29].

The aforementioned circumstances are supported by a variety of testimonial data sources, including the outcomes of non-obvious investigative (search) procedures, records from intelligence operations, statements from witnesses and individuals under suspicion, expert evaluations,

examination of financial transactions, electronic media data, and the conclusions from technical and forensic analysis. Establishing the relationship between distinct criminal behaviors to confirm their affiliation with a single criminal process is a crucial objective of the investigation [30].

It is impossible to conduct an efficient investigation into crimes falling under this category without making substantial use of specialized skills. Forensic chemical analyses are specifically used to identify prohibited compounds, ascertain their category, quantitative measures, and active component concentration. Additionally, computer-technical investigations are highly relevant because they allow the evaluation of data from cell phones, servers, electronic correspondence, cryptocurrency accounts, and other digital platforms that facilitate remote drug sales [31].

Additionally, economic and fiscal analyses are used to confirm cases of asset purification (money laundering) resulting from criminal activities and to track the origin of monies obtained illegally.

## Conclusion

The illegal transportation of drugs by organized crime groups is one of the most dangerous types of criminal activity, according to research. This category of crimes includes a high level of concealment, regularity, global reach, and the ability to quickly adapt to modern technological circumstances. Because these crimes are structured, they are more likely to be embedded in the underground economy, legitimize profits, engage in corrupt activities, and jeopardize national security. The provisions of Ukraine's criminal, criminal procedural, and special legislation, as well as international agreements on fighting the illegal drug trade and transnational crimes, make up the regulatory and legal framework for fighting organized drug crime. Simultaneously, a review of present regulations and how they are applied has revealed a number of systemic problems. The concepts of "organized unit" and "criminal organization," verifying the stability and hierarchical hierarchy of criminal organizations, and effectively managing the results of covert investigatory (inspection) measures are particularly challenging.

Finding information on crimes related to illegal drug trafficking by organized crime is a multi-layered process that requires the complex application of procedural,

forensic, and operational-search tools. The success of the investigation depends on the prompt execution of covert investigatory (inspection) actions, the use of specialized knowledge, proper coordination between law enforcement agencies, and professional procedural support from the prosecutor.

The documenting of initiators' and supervisors' acts requires extra attention because the prosecution usually only discovers lower-tier criminals. Demonstrating the systematic nature of the activities, a clear division of responsibility, and a common goal among the participants are necessary for the proper classification of criminal activity.

The active use of digital technology, digital currencies, darknet platforms, and distant drug trafficking techniques characterizes the current era of organized drug crime. This calls for expanding international cooperation, strengthening the legal control of digital evidence, and improving forensic methods to combat new forms of criminal activity.

Other difficulties brought about by martial law include the utilization of temporarily occupied areas, modifications to the logistics of drug supply lines, and an increase in the clandestine nature of crimes. This emphasizes that in order to fight organized crime, law enforcement organizations must coordinate their activities with international norms and bolster their analytical support.

According to the assessment, it is recommended to: Improve departmental coordination and create specialized analytical sections to combat online drug trafficking; expand procedural methods for using electronic evidence and analyzing digital currency exchanges; improve penal code provisions for identifying signs of organized crime involvement in the digital realm; and increase international cooperation by joining joint investigative teams and utilizing Europol and Interpol frameworks.

Therefore, in order to increase the effectiveness of the fight against organized drug crime, it is imperative that legal governance be thoroughly refined, that appropriate procedural assistance for inquiries be provided, and that law enforcement operations be updated systemically while taking into account contemporary technological and global challenges.

#### Acknowledgement

None.

#### Conflict of Interest

Authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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